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Interview with Jim Carroll (FA 1098)

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Kentucky Folklife Program
Interview Transcription

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Interviewer/Recordist: Brent Björkman
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Transcribing Conventions:
Use of square brackets [ ] indicates a note from the transcriber.
Use of parentheses ( ) indicates a conversational aside.
Use of em dash — indicates an interruption of thought or conversation.
Use of ellipses … indicates a discontinued thought.
Use of quotations “ “ indicates dialogue within conversation.
Use of italics indicates emphasis.
Use of underline indicates movie, magazine, newspaper, or book titles.
Names of interviewee and interviewer are abbreviated by first and last initial letters.
Time is recorded in time elapsed by the convention [hours:minutes:seconds].

Note: This transcription is as accurate and complete as possible. In any question of interpretation, the researcher is referred to the recording itself as the primary document representing this event.

[time elapsed in hours:minutes:seconds]

[00:00:00]
JIM CARROLL: That wouldn’t happen though.

BRENT BJÖRKMAN: [throat clearing] Alright, today is January 9, 2014. And I’m here with Jim Carroll. This is Brent Björkman, the director of the Kentucky Folklife Program, doing a project, part of the Archie Green Fellowship for the Library of Congress, talking about the working lives of park rangers. Jim is, has been a park ranger, big career in the park service. And we’re here to talk with him at, we’re at his home in Cave City, Kentucky. Jim, I’ve been talking to a few of, a couple of your past colleagues and things at Mammoth Cave and it kind of started out most often with our interviews talking about, you know, how you got started in, in the pursuit of this job. Some people fell into it. Some people knew it from day one. What, can you tell us your story?

JC: I, I, I guess I kind of fell into it, so to speak. I do, I do have a 5x7 photo here of where I went on a cave tour at Mammoth Cave back when I was probably about eight years old. And here I am, skinny little me, sitting on the, on the front row. I, I don’t want to dig it out now because it would probably just embarrass me, but anyway. After I came back from, from Vietnam, I spent about a year and a half over there, and got out of the service. And I knew it was time to come back to college and one of my friends from high school, his mother worked at, as a secretary for the Division of Interpretation at Mammoth Cave. And she asked me one, one evening, early in December, she said, “Jim, what are you, what are you going to do for work this summer?” I said, “Well, I haven’t really planned on, I haven’t really thought about it.” She said, “You need to work at Mammoth Cave.” She said, “I’ll bring you an application.” So she brings me an application, I fill it out, she takes it back. Well, she calls me up, she says, “Jim, they’re getting ready to go through the applications. You need to come in and have your face and a name together. So come in and, you know, and talk to Lynn McKenzie, who’s the chief interpreter.” So I did, I made the appointment, came in, talked to him, told him, you know, interested in the job. And he thanked me and I left. Well, a few weeks later, she calls me again. She said, “Jim, they’ve made a cut. Now you need to come back one more, again. Make sure they put the name with a face.” And so I did and I was a five point veteran, so that kind of helped a little bit too. And next thing I know, I was, I
was hired as a seasonal guide. I believe it was in 1972 is when I started as a seasonal guide at Mammoth Cave. So that kind of got me, got me in the door, so to speak. With that little photo, I probably had been there once before, but that didn’t really, I don’t think that really was a driving factor. But I worked there as a seasonal for several summers and really grew to like the job. I liked the park, you know, liked the people I worked with and when it came time to, to graduate college, I thought, well, you know, maybe this is a pretty good career, you know, to get into the park service. Well, I was looking for full-time, my, I graduated in January and so, and so I was, I was through with school. Had a Bachelors degree in business administration. And so I was applying different places, or I had applied several different places, especially at winter parks, that sort of thing, and I got a call from Biscayne National Monument. That was before it was a national park. Probably just one step up when it was, when it was homestead state, it was a homestead county park is what it was before it became a national monument then a national park. And a fellow down there, Don Weir, was chief ranger, he, and he hired me to, to go down and be in law enforcement on boat operations, air and, and water. And I asked him later, I said, “Why did you pick me?” And he said, “You’re the only one of the applications said you’d even been on a canoe. You’d been on a canoe in Green River.” He said, “I figured I could teach you, if you weren’t afraid of water, I could teach you how to, how to operate a powerboat.” So that’s how I went down there, worked down there for about nine months.

BB: What was that job? What was it?

JC: That was primarily law enforcement on the water. And the, because at that time, Biscayne had a hundred thousand acres and five thousand was land, the rest of it was water. Now it’s like over a million acres and most of that’s water, very little land. It’s, it’s, the boundaries have been expended, extended quite a bit, north, south, and all. Still goes out to the blue water, but that pretty well took care of it. So I was down there at that time. I missed a summer at Mammoth Cave, then I came to Mammoth Cave, and then I hired, I hired back in again as a summer seasonal.
BB: Um-hm. Because you’d grown up around here.

JC: Um-hm.

BB: Yeah.

JC: I, I grew up, I moved to Munfordville, which is not, about thirty miles from the park when I was ten years old, came in from Virginia.

BB: Okay. So that first job, the Biscayne, we note. The jobs at Mammoth, how did you progress? You had this law enforcement experience. Where did you start to fall in here? [0:05:03]

JC: Well, at, at Mammoth Cave I started working as a tour guide again and one of the superintendents, let’s see, I guess it would be before Bob Deskins and after Joe Coleeza. I can’t think of his name right off-hand. Radon, radon had become an issue with the tour guides, so the way we diminished that was to rotate people in and out. Well, what they did, they put up, they came up with split positions. You’d work four months in law enforcement, four months in the cave as a guide and four months as resource management. So when that came up, the applications, you know, were out and, and I was sitting at the coffee shop one day with Henry Holman who was, who was a long term guide at Mammoth Cave. And he said, you know, “Are you going to put in?” I said, “Well, I don’t have much of a choice, much of a chance.” I said, “I think you and Joe McGowan have got a, you know, bigger chance over me. You’ve been around here longer than I have.” He said, “Well, you ought to put in just to show interest.” Well, I put in. And I was selected as the first one, probably because I was a five point veteran and they weren’t. But, but they were hired in soon after and that’s where a lot of the tour guides then became “splits” as we called ourselves. And you worked law enforcement, resource management, and back in, you know, interpretation doing guiding.
BB: For a, for a chunk of time?

JC: Um-hm. And so that, and that kind of gave me a taste of the other things. But I had worked law enforcement at Biscayne. See, that also had given me a, a leg up too because I had had a law enforcement training down there.

BB: Um-hm.

JC: Actually, during that one time, I came back to, to Great Smokies for a week of law enforcement training. And, you know, while I was at Biscayne. So it was, and we did law enforcement training down there as well. So at that time I had what, what law enforcement credentials they had, I had all of it.

BB: Um-hm. You had the law enforcement, you had the interpretive.

JC: Interpretive side of it and I'd worked some resource management, which basically was, it was, was, you know, walking trails, working trails and, you know, trail, trail erosion, that sort of thing.

BB: Did that stay that way over time? This, this, this—

JC: I'd say it lasted for several years. Lasted for several years and then they kind of got out of it. I think there was a concern about supervisors. You may, you may have worked for three different supervisors in the course of a year. So, who does evaluations and who, you know, how do, how do they coordinate all of that? That was kind of diff-, it was kind of foreign to them.

BB: Okay. Okay.
JC: And it, somewhere in that time, I think it was Bob Deskins, came up, and you know, and, and wanted to do a, a safety position, a full-time safety position. And I put in for that and was selected. And so I, I came into that as a 5/7/9, GS 5/7/9, but it was part-time. And somewhere before he left and went to Atlanta, to, as Deputy Regional Director, he decided to make everybody, you know, as one gift. If you want to be full-time, well then, now bless you. You can be full-time and not part-time. So a lot of us part-timers became full-timers as his. He went to Atlanta, which he came back on an operations evaluation and dinged us for it, but he laughed about it and went on. But it, it was a way, it was again a different superintendent and then there, another, another job. That was safety con-, considerations that I did, you know, all the occupational safety help for the park. And then another superintendent came in and a person left and concessions operations came up. That was the, the people that operate the hotel, the bus, the bus trips, you know, the stores and the, it was Miss Green River boat ride at the time. There has to be a park service liaison that handles that, you know. It’s a contract representative between the parks service and the, and the concessionaire. So I went, I, I had been doing safety evaluations and I had been aware of what the other was, and no body else in the park did. So I was kind of a natural whiz in, so to speak, to, to, to do that. And so I was selected as sa-, I was doing safety and concessions. And I did that for a couple of years, and then got a, that was as a, as a GS9. And then got a desk audit. And the desk audit showed that the safety was a, was a nine position and the concessions was a nine position, all on its own because of dissembling information and things that you had to do and skill sets. When they, when they do that, then they combine them, that makes you a GS11. So, superintendent held that for a year and so I got, I got a GS11 out of that. So I’m, you know, there’s a guy that’s been to one other national park. [0:10:00] And then later it, it goes in, from, from that, from safety and concessions to where Ron Switzer came in as the superintendent, and he wanted to do something totally different. He wanted to do a division of external programs and communications. And nobody, I mean, that was not, that’s not a standard park service position or division by any chance or means. No, but, and most people have never heard of it. But he wanted to do it because it, he wanted these things done and he didn’t want them scattered all over the park. He wanted them done, he wanted me to handle it. He, I guess we had a relationship,
you know, it was a decent relationship. He, he thought I could handle it, you know, and work closely with him and get it, get the results that he wanted. Because what we did, we pulled Vicky Carson who was interpretation. We pulled her in as public information officer, and that’s what she’s been doing ever since. And she does a bang-up job of that. Then there was Trey Seymour. He was in interpretation. But he was, he was doing guided tours and then he was piddling around with the computer. Well—I said piddling around, that’s really not a good, good word for him. But he wasn’t able to be dedicated to do what needed to be done. But he’s a, he’s a, he’s a whiz with it. And he, he’s the one that’s done all of our public-, all of our publications, website development, all that sort of stuff is done by him. And so that, all of that came under my purview as well. Not to do it, but to supervise it, to make sure we got the results out that, that we’re looking for and it was done like we wanted it done. And then later, it came up, not too far after, it came up in communications. Well, here we want to do, we’re going to, we were just starting in IT, information technology. It was a new word. Nobody knew what it was. Well, yeah, we got phones on the desks, so what? The phone company takes care of them. Well, not any more. And then there’s, you know, your computer. What, what’s it linked to and where does it go? How does it work and who repairs it and all that sort of stuff. So the, IT came in there and wound up hiring two people, Matt Arnold and Pat Bryce, who are still there. And both of those guys, they’re just, you know, they’re just great. I mean, nobody, you know, nobody can do what they’ve done, the way they’ve done it and, and they’ve, you know, they brought the park, brought the park from plug-in telephone modems to fiber-optic wire communications systems, with, you know, with all its routers and all the necessary equipment to make that work according to park service standards. You know, we were running fiber-optics, getting ready to run fiber-optic cable, and we said, “Well somebody’s got to, got to, got to do the ends on the, on this fiber.” You know, this stuff is about the size of a hair. “And who’s going to do it?” And Matt said, “Well,” he’s a fine-scale modeler on his own, own right. And he said, “Well, I can probably do that.” I said, “Well, let’s buy a kit.” You can buy, you can buy a kit to, to do that, to polish the ends of them. And I said, “If it works out,” I said, “We’ll, we’ll buy a good kit. But just buy one that will get us by and see how, see how it’s going to work for you.” And then next thing I know, we’re buying the big kit and we’re off and running. So we ran fiber-
optics all over that park. And our people, you know, it was all done in, in house. And you know, we had maintenance guys, had crews that would go out and run the cable underground and our people would, would terminate it and run it into the houses, the buildings, up to, up to each user and get it working, you know.

BB: You think this kind of expansion that, that you’re speaking that Ron kind of did and you went—is that something of a, as far as you know, with your colleagues around the country, was that something that was em-, emulated or, or something that was done in other places?

JC: I, I, most people, he had me talk to several different superintendents about what it was. I, I think it was, our region allowed him to do it. If, it said, “Ron, if you’ve got the money and the, and the staff to do it, do what you want to do.” They backed him. And the la-, you know, I don’t know that many other parks wanted to take that stand. Now that’s the things that we were doing in the park. But we also, I wound up, I spent a lot of time with Ron, we did a lot of the external communication from the stand point of local, state, and federal government relationships and as well as tourism. You know, the state, local tourism and national tourism organizations, that sort of thing. We did, we did all that coordination as well. We’d, we’d go to all the, all the trade shows in the state anyway, we didn’t do too many national ones, but we went to those. And just, you know, we were, we were, make sure that people knew that we were Mammoth Cave and you know, we were, we were here to, you know, to be part of the players, not, you know, and just, we were, we were available and, you know, anything we can do to help you, we’ll try to do it.

BB: So these were a lot of big changes in your, in your late, maybe let’s say, last half of your career?

JC: Um-hm. Um-hm. Because I, we, I, I did that for ten years. It was, I think it was, it was about ’79, no it was longer than, longer than that, probably ’89. Because I’ve been out for about six years now. So it’s been about, I did that for about ten years. Ten or eleven years. [0:15:00] And then when I retired, the way things were going at that point, when people
retired, there just weren’t the funds to keep a lot of positions, you know. A lot of the job
titles, a lot of the jobs went out and went to different people, different places. Or some
things just weren’t done. But you know, it’s like one thing that, that I did, I put together a
congressional liaison and each fall we would invite all of the state coordinators from all of
the federal Senator and Congressman’s offices to come in for a day. And basically we would
set down and just chat with them and say, “This is what’s going on in our world. You know,
do you have questions? You know, what can we help you with?” I got to where, with
Senator McConnell’s state coordinator, he’d pick up the phone and he’d, you know, he’d call.
I could call him, either way. That’s the sort of relationships that we were trying to make is
that if I had a concern or if he had a concern or if, anything that we could help each other
with, you know, then we would, we would do it. It’s like, he told me one time, he says,
“Yeah, but,” he said, “If I send you a letter and, asking for this—“

[INTERUPTION—RECORDING STOPS]

JC: We, we attended Kentucky Tourism Council meetings, became active members. Actually,
Mick Holm, Ron Switzer and myself were the first three with Kentucky Tourism Council to
have, to be part of their management professional development program. We were the first
ones that got, that did, did the requirements for that, so it kind of helped their program to
get them started and we, we, we had things that we had, were cooking with, and it fit their
agendas, so you know, we worked it that way. And it worked out good. I mean, it was, it was
a good pat on the back for both of us, you know, for doing it that way. But I, I, you know,
even getting out with, with other people, we also had the volunteer program, the VIP
program was in my, in my section as well. Maryann Davis was doing that at the time.

BB: Tell me about that.

JC: Well the volunteer program was, you know, trying to get people interested in coming to
the park to help us do some things that we needed help with, you know. It could be all sorts
of things. It’s, the, the volunteer program helped instrumentally with the, with the trail
around the beaver pond, Sloan's Crossing Pond, as we, as we now call it. All of that was with Target store employees. And we had American Airlines and I don't know who all else, donated money and, and lumber and that sort of thing. And then a lot of the Target store employees came down on their own time and did, and did a lot of the work. And they've done other, a lot of other projects at one time in the park. So there was a lot of, you know, a lot of people coming in to help us with, with major events. We also, probably never done by any other national park, I don't guess, but we, we, we did juried art shows. I don't know if you remember those. We had—and our Earthspeak program. And we had, we had a lot of the different activities going on with that and one of them was a juried art show. And I think people that know state politics, Crit Luallen came down and was our, was our juror one year. And just tickled to death with it and just had no idea we were doing that sort of things. Well normally, you don't. I mean, national parks don't do that sort of thing. But Ron Switzer had an interest in the arts community, and so he wanted to do it. Well he's the superintendent. He can pretty well do what he wants. And so that's, we did that for several years. You know, some people said good things about it and some people didn't, so, but it was, it still worked out though. The artists that took place, took place in it, they were local for the most part. They were Hart County, Warren County, Edmonson County. All local. And so it helped to bring, bring people together again, you know, with the park. And that was, that was kind of the, the main objective of it.

BB: What are the relationships between park, people that work at the park, rangers and things, and the locals? I think every place that has a national park certainly has its own story about when the park was established and the local people and that. But over time here, there, people that had lived here for many years, did they, was all the people that worked at the park, that were from this area? I mean, do we have, do we have a more proportional amount of people that are from this area that work here, as opposed to others that may have people just coming in? Are seasonals from this area or did they come from all over and—
JC: Well, that, the, I think you find a lot of, lot of employees are from the area, not, you know, not all of them, of course. But there’s a lot of them that are. And it’s, you go back to when the park was established, you hear a lot of different people say a lot of different things about the establishment of Mammoth Cave. It was six hundred small farms. And a lot of the land was, was used pretty hard. There wasn’t a lot of standing timber. It had already been cut and sold for railroad ties [0:20:00] or whatever else. And so people, they, you know, well we all hear that they were offered market value. Well, you know, market value may not be able to give you money to go anywhere else and do anything, either. So depending on what the value is, how that works. A friend of my wife’s family is the Johns family, and up in the northeast corner of the Green River, their property, part of their property was taken as part of that. They didn’t want to sell. They weren’t, they weren’t willing sellers, but they had to. It was condemned and they had, they had to take it. And, and if you look at the boundary line up through there, did they have to take the house and the barn? No. They could have moved it over a little bit and not taken either one of them and left the farm pretty well intact. But it busted it up and so they, they moved off and sold it off and they were gone. So it, it’s, you know, those, a lot of things—and their was a report about a, a ranger that, riding on a horse that nobody liked, and I understand may have gotten shot at one time, you know. It’s, you know, I’ve heard, I’ve heard that, I don’t know that personally, but you know, I’ve heard that. And you know, and it depends on how you, how you treat people and I think where we were trying to come from is trying to open up and, and be warmer and more friendly to, to the local folks. At one time, we had a chief interpreter and I won’t say who it is, he wanted to get rid of all the locals that we had doing cave tours. He didn’t like them. And I, I had, I had a distinct pleasure one year to supervise one of our longest term seasonals, and I think is still employed at the park, and what he wanted me to do was to give him a, put him, put him in competition for rehire, rather than keeping him above the competition pool. He wanted me to put him back in the competition so they could overlook him. Well, this same person, we had brought in the winter before, during Christmas vacation, and had him do video for our new seasonals to see, “This is what we want. This is our idea of perfect interpretation. This is what we want people to do.” So I asked him, I said, “You want me to tell this guy he’s back in competition?” I said, “It
ain’t going to happen. If you want it to happen, if you want to tell him, you tell him. He, he
gets evaluations that I see that I see he needs.” And I went with him on a couple of trips.
Never let me down, you know. Never went with him again. Didn’t have to. Knew what it
was. He helped train me.

BB: Speaking of interpretive training, you know I’ve done a few interviews now, and
thinking about how I’ve had people talk a little bit about the change in what the park
service would like to have, or how did, how has interpretation changed from the old school
interpreters. We had, you know we’ve had interpretation in the park for close to two
hundred years in different forms and fashions, but how has it changed over time in, in what
we’re trying to get across to the public and why has it changed over?

JC: Well, I think, I think a lot of that, when I started, you went on other tours with the old
time guides and you listened. And there were some, there were some guide manuals and a
few things to look at, but not a whole lot. And you really didn’t have time to go out and do
your own research, I mean. You, you picked up what was there and that, that’s what you
went with. And, but, if some, if you weren’t telling it, if you weren’t telling it correctly, then
somebody would straighten you up. Maybe, maybe not in front of a group of course, but you
know, sometimes they would, they would tell you what’s going on. What’s good, what’s not
so good about what you were doing. And the supervisor would do that when they went
with you on a tour. So, but that was, what’s, and, and I’ll give the credit probably to Joy
Lyons, a lot. I mean, when she stepped in, you know, into interpretation, she, matter of fact,
I was her first supervisor. And I put her back in competition, by the way, but anyway, for
the first year. And, and she, she just did tell me that she appreciated that because it woke
her up. But anyway, she’s encouraged people to do their own research and to look beyond
just what the old guys were telling. And so, it, you know, it’s brought up a whole new realm
of information that was available to us, you know. What did we know about the black
history at Mammoth Cave? Not a lot. Not a lot. I mean, we, we knew that, yeah, they went in
the cave. They were, they were guides. What else did we know about? Did we know
anything about their family? No, we didn’t. So you know, the, the new interpretive—you
know, that, and I say new, that’s probably within the last fifteen years, I mean. But they’re finding out more about it and how it, you know, and finding out more about the truth though and what, what really has been. And has it changed a whole lot? Yes, because I think it gives people more information, more knowledge base to, to, to develop their talk from. Because your spiel that you give on a tour shouldn’t be like anybody else’s. We had one old fellow and I loved him to death, was Shorty Coates, [0:25:00] was an old-time guide. And if you got him on a tour and he was in the middle of, of one of his talks, if somebody interrupted him and he lost his train of thought, he would immediately go back to the first word and start again and spit it all right back out again. No matter if he was halfway through it. You got the first half again. But that’s just, that was him, you know. So take it, take it for what its worth, that was him. And he gave you a good tour. But it was, it was, it was pretty well, it was a tape recording. But he was good.

BB: Right. What I think is interesting is this idea that, and you mentioned a little bit about working with concessions, but right before this last question you talked about how the community that was either displaced or, you know—how do you work better with communities? And I think about you talking about your career. You seem to be a people person or understand it or want to make these connections. How was it working with concessions? Did that, did that change over time? Maybe if you know any, what happened before you? I’m just curious about that culture, working with the concessionaires.

JC: Well I think, I think a lot of that has to do with the personalities. When I started working with the concessions operation, Garner Hansen was alive and he, he was the principal person in national park concessions. And they operated in several different national parks. They even, even when the parks service needed somebody to get, like go into Death Valley, and when, when that concessionaire went belly-up, they went in there and started the operation and, and, and made it work, you know, at the parks services request. Lots of times, they, they were doing things like that. But when, there were times that the superintendent, and that, and Mr. Hansen wouldn’t see eye-to-eye, you know. They would, they’d bust heads. It’d be left up to me to try to kind of soften the blow between the
two of them so we could get along. Because I would be doing the, the, the inspection reports, the safety and the concessions reports. I mean they’re, they’re detailed things that have to be done periodically, you know, for the concessions operation in contract compliance and that sort of thing. And year end documents and looking at the financial reports, you know, that sort of thing. And, but for the most part, the concessionaire tried to do what the parks service wanted. I think the concessionaire’s problem was that every time we got a new superintendent, the direction changed. By the time they get something going and working and got used to it, then we’d want to make another change. And I, I, I totally can see that. But I was caught in the middle of that one, you know. So we try, I would try to soften as much as I could coming from either direction. And try to make it work. Because the end result is, what kind of services are we providing to the public, and are they affordable, you know. That’s, that’s what, we want to have the best, best services and for the least costly amount of way of doing it.

BB: Um-hm.

JC: So that’s, that’s what, that’s what was kind of guided me on in working with concessions operation. Knowing that we had an older infrastructure. I was there, actually before I was doing concessions work, I was, I was law enforcement. And there was the old hotel, now, the second, not the first hotel that burnt way back in the teens. But the second hotel that was taken down in ’79. I was the fire, I was the ranger fireguard assigned to that building at night, all during the night time to make sure that if it caught fire, everybody got out. That was my one sole mission. Make sure if it catches fire, get everybody out. I asked my supervisor, I said, “Do you want me then go get the fire truck?” “No, just get everybody out.” That’s what they wanted. They wanted everybody safe. And that, for some reason, the, and that was a, that was kind of a thing between the parks service and the concessionaire. Could it have been mitigated differently? Perhaps. But it wasn’t, so, you know, that, that building had to come down because of, because parks service requested it. Could you have gone in there, put sprinklers in it, done this or that and the other? Maybe. Was it worth it? I don’t know. I, I wasn’t into that end of it at the time. It just, you know, it was, it was a
delightful old building. If it had caught fire, it would have gone in a hurry. Just like the previous one did. They said the previous one, back in the teens, that the blaze could be seen from Cave City. That’s quite a ways away.

BB: How has law enforcement changed over the time that you started? Can you kind of give me an overview of, of, of that progression in your mind []?

JC: Well I, I, you know, I, not, not been in the law enforcement or that close with it at the park in the last, you know, most recent years, when I was at Biscayne, that first, first chance of doing any law enforcement, they taught us, they, we gave, we had some basics. We had, had to go to the pistol range to shoot, you know. And they gave you several courses of shoot-, go shoot, that sort of thing, but we didn’t get a lot, we didn’t get a lot of constitutional law [0:30:00] and things that you can do or can’t do, that sort of thing. We kind of, kind of winged that one. And not until I actually got a forty hour course at the Smokies, when I was at Biscayne, went up there and took a training course, and I learned more, more of the, of the constitutional side of it, and then when I went to Mammoth Cave, we were always doing in-house training there, you know. Every year you, you did, you did forty hours every year. And lots, we were, lots of times we couldn’t afford to go somewhere, so we’d bring people in. We’d structure the training, we’d do it in-house. And of course everybody got back, back on the pistol range and that sort of thing. But for the most part, it was, you know, I guess a, a thing that I’ll always remember, sticks in my mind as, we did a practical pistol shooting, and there was one thing, shoot or don’t shoot. And there, and there was an image of a police officer. He had his badge in one hand and he had a gun in the other. And he turned on me. And you had, you were, this was a movie screen and you shot these little plastic bullets. And he, he comes around like that and he’s got this grin on his face, and he pulls his weapon around and he levels it at me and I shoot him. And the guy stops the camera and I said, “Well, I guess I blew that one.” He says, “No, you’re the only one got it right.” He said, “He was going to shoot you.” So he rolled the camera and he did. He said, “He’s one of the bad guys.” I’ve thought, well, who would have, who would have figured that one, I picked wrong. But the guy would level, I was watching the gun. I saw the
badge but I was watching the gun. And that’s, they know that, but still, I still remember that even though I don’t do law enforcement.

BB: Law enforcement seems like it’s maybe a little bit more, I see, I saw them at the park a lot of the guys had full Kevlar and their Glocks and that—had law enforcement, had they always been that decked out in, in, in equipment and—

JC: When I, when I was at Biscayne, we had stainless steel revolvers and we carried them, usually in a brief, a leather briefcase on the boat because where we were at, we got sprayed with saltwater constantly. And the gun, stainless steel will rust. And we didn’t get into that many high, you know, high confrontational issues at the time. For the most part at Biscayne it was, hey, this is now a national park. You can’t do this, you can’t do that. We’re going to give you a courtesy tag, you know. We’re going to record that we talked to you, and got your boat number, that sort of thing, but, you know, we’re going to let you go. Not, not, no big deal. But if it happens again, then we might give you a citation. But we were, all we were trying to do was educate people that it was now a national park and you couldn’t pick up small spiny lobsters and star-, and, and you know, and tropical fish, and you know, all these sort of things. You had to just leave everything, the sea fans and all that sort of thing. And the corals. You had to just leave everything there. That was, that was a new thought process for everybody. Back at, back when I was at Mammoth Cave, we went through a lot, through the law enforcement training and at the time we carried revolvers. That’s what everybody carried. And the, the, the Glock pistols, the automatic pistols are, you know, relatively, relatively new, I mean, twelve, fifteen years, I don’t know, maybe more than that. But the training has even gotten better, I think because it’s not, it’s more of a, the law enforcement is more technical than it used to be, I think. You know, you’ve got, I remember when the Miranda warnings, you know, you had to give a Miranda warning. You had to, you had to give people their rights. And there were certain things you could do, you know, you didn’t just stop somebody and bail them out of the car and then tear the inside of the car out to go look for something, just to see if they had anything. I remember as a kid at Munfordville, there was a constable that would stop people. The interstate stopped at Bonnieville at the
time. And at Munfordville, they would come through, and they were, I, I hung out at the Shell station out there as a kid. You know, I was fifteen, sixteen years old, and the constable, if you came through with Michigan plates and you were black, you got stopped. And he tore into your car. We watched it. Night after night. And, and if you had beer in your trunk, you, you were going downtown. If you had a knife or a gun in your car, you were going downtown. He'd take you, he'd arrest you, take you downtown, you'd pay your fine, then he'd bring you back, send you on your way. Well, that constable couldn't write his name. So he had to have somebody with him to write the ticket. And everything that he was doing is illegal. I mean, just illegal as it can be. So that's where Miranda really needed to be in, in that sort of thing. That's about the time, shortly after I saw that, that's when that, that kicked in. So, there, you know, you don't, you don't find that sort of thing now. And in the park service, you know, the rangers are, they live to a pretty high standard and, you know, he said, do you really have high crime? You may not have a lot of it. But you have the same issues everywhere, that you find everywhere else. There's, there's no real difference because you've got the same people.

BB: Um-hm. [0:35:00] You mentioned, you mentioned before that, another thing that's been interesting for me is to find out about, I know that your wife wasn't connected to this, but there were a lot of people that either met or that, you know, and that's interesting. You're, maybe speak to that? Or you also mentioned to me when you were showing me a couple of pictures that your daughter was working as a seasonal person.

JC: Um-hm.

BB: Is, tell me about how that, that worked out in your, in your, in your family example. Or other examples of, of things you've witnessed in your career.

JC: Well, that, yeah. Like you're right. My, my wife and I did not meet at Mammoth Cave. She never worked there. And she's not really interested in being underground. She, she's a little bit claustrophobic like her mother is. She's a, so that's you know, there's really not a
Mammoth Cave tie with her. It’s been totally separate from that. My daughter, on the other hand, she was I think fourteen and decided she wanted a summer job, you know, to, to earn some extra money. And she went out and she got herself a baby-sitting job for the summer. And she really didn’t like it. And then the next year at fifteen, she was, she said, “Well, I'll try it one more time,” you know. So she got this one little girl that she had to keep that was just rotten. And I think my daughter may have had some instinct to hold her head under the pool at sometime, down under the water. But anyway, she didn’t. And she said, she came home, she said, "I'm going to, I'm going to go down and”—the computer’s in the basement with the printer—“and do a resume.” And then she had her mom take her around, and she took her resume around at age fifteen [Background noise: ring tone and static] to, to take, take the resume around and give it to different people, different places she could work. Well one place that she went to was the American Cave and Karst Museum in Horse Cave, ACCA. Well she knew a lady up there, Peggy Nims, who had also worked with her at Barren County Middle School. So she kind of, Hannah was kind of a knownian, known with, with her. She was known. And so she, you know, applied. And Peggy hired her at fifteen, at the age of fifteen to be a seasonal interpreter up there. So she got her first tour, cave tour guiding experience at Horse Cave. And then she did that for several, several years and when, once she went to, went to UK, she came home, she said, “What do you think of the chances of me getting on at Mammoth Cave?” I said, “Give it a shot and find out.” And of course, with that previous experience, and then the reference, Peggy’s well known in her circles, you know, the interpretive circles. And so Hannah was hired in. And the picture that you were talking about is hanging on the wall here. And it is a picture of my daughter and myself at the natural entrance. That was my, about my last winter, before I retired. And she was coming in working, I think, Christmas that year, working the Christmas break during school’s out. So it, she, you know, she, and a lot, there’s several staff people at Mammoth Cave had children had an interest in it and came to work. I think Vicky and Bobby Carson, their, their daughter Cecily is, is working at the park. But there’s several good chances of summer jobs that have been available or in the evening if they chose not to go any beyond, any beyond that. So it’s, it, it’s, it’s a little different for some people, but it, it worked out well.
BB: Um-hm. Is, is Mammoth Cave known as a training ground for people to maybe go on, you know. I’ve talked to a lot of people that are from this area, have jobs, always wanted to work here, I feel very lucky, those kinds of things. But, I mean, it sounds like you have a really good training program and people, is it a place that’s known or has been known, that you’re here to get a really good education in this and then they maybe go on to other places in the U.S.?

JC: I, I think, I think in the interpretive circles in the park service, if you’ve worked at Mammoth Cave, it, it, it bodes very well for your experience that you can do structured interpretation and you, you know, you can, you can speak on your feet. You know that, that’s one of the hardest things to do is, you know, can you, can you run and gun? Can you talk, walk and talk at the same time? And you know, and carry on a program, but yet not, not feel like it’s a canned program. Can you learn, can you learn your subject and then give it back to people in a, in a, in a method and a form that, that they want, they want to hear, that they liked? I think that’s, that’s the thing about Mammoth Cave. It’s given you, it’s given you the, and it gives you the authority, you, you, you have to understand, you know, when you first take a tour, one of my first tours that I guided myself was the, what was called at the time the half-day tour. And it was, it was a four mile trip and we sp-, usually we split the group at the entrance. [0:40:00] We’d take two hundred and forty people is what we were taking at the time, and go the Snowball room, one mile, and then let people get a chance, something to eat or whatever, drink and then you’d assemble your group again and take off from there and go another three miles to go out. And so you’ll find that that, at first, I think I’d been on that trip four times and the, and the fellow that was leading the, leading the group, he said, “Jim,” he said, “How many times you been on this trip?” I said, “Four.” He said, “Don’t you think it’s time you guided, led out?” So I did. I had no idea where I was going, which way. First time I’d ever walked in the front of the tour. And I said, “Which way do I turn?” He said, “Just follow the light switches.” He said, “Every time it gets dark, look for another light switch.” And you know, and that’s, that’s, that was the first time I actually quote “got on the rock,” as they call it. And, and it’s the forth time I’d been through there, I’d
been, you know. You got to start sometime. But you know, as you, as you, as you do, as you develop your interpretive technique, you first of all, when you first go through there, you don’t know anything, you don’t have anything to say and you’re just scared to death of what’s going on. After a while, you get to where, well, I know all this information. Everybody wants to know all of it. So you, you bore them to death with how much information you can tell them. And, you know, then there’s, you know, you’re not reading them, and they’re stamping the ground trying to get out of there, and you’re still talking. Well, when you finally realize, wait a minute, what you’ve got to do is hone this down to something that’s, that’s appropriate for the group that you’ve got. Hopefully you can feel what they’re interested in by questions or whatever and give it but don’t keep them at one spot over about five minutes. That’s, that’s a long time for somebody just to stand there and look at you. And then move on. If you want, you know, if you can make smaller, more frequent trips, stops, do that, but don’t, don’t, don’t just talk just to be talking. And I, I, I think the third stage, when you finally get to the third stage, take, it takes a while for it to, but I think everybody goes through that, through that process. But it, but it’s, it’s pretty [ ] when all of a sudden you have the information, you’re comfortable with it, and then you’re, you’re able to answer people’s questions and give them the, the feedback that you think they’re looking for.

BB: Have you had some pretty crazy questions or some crazy incidents that have happened that you, interesting, funny, scary, funny, that you could share?

JC: Only, only one that’s really was bad that happened to me. I was guiding the lantern tour. That’s me and forty people with kerosene lanterns, and one other guide. And the other guide, on a lantern tour, lots of times, the other guide would go on up ahead or go looking in somewhere, dig-, looking in rocks or seeing what was up in there, or be in the back, whatever, and stay way back in the back. I had a kid, I let a small child carry my lantern. I guess he was ten or twelve years old, and, rather than me carry it. And I had my torch bucket and my torch stick, which we were throwing torches at the time. That gives you some idea how old it is. And the kid turns, talks to mom and daddy. I go in the dark, and the
next thing I know, I step off the edge of the trail and fall probably about four feet down. Scraped up my arm, my, my, my head a little bit. And, and the uniform, I'm in a standard uniform when it, now that gray shirt is black from all the soot and smoke and everything, and there I am, and it's red because of bleeding and all that sort of thing. I'm not really hurt, per se, but embarrassed more than anything. And so I call for Bill River, he was the, he was the other guide. I called for old Bill to come take the group. And he took the group and went on out with them. And I turned around and went back. And I caught some pretty awful stares coming back out, out of the cave. There I am, all dirty and black and, and bleeding and everything else. And then Lewis Cutliff who was the chief guide at the time, he got up there and he's, he's called me “Candy” ever since that and I won't use the last part of the world. But he had some green soap and he scrubbed me. I mean, it stung like the devil. He said, “This'll fix it.” And in about two days it scabbed over and I was, I was, you know, I was in good shape. So the green soap and the scrubbing worked. So. And I was more careful. I didn't, I didn't give my lantern away anymore. More careful about it. But just one quick moment and that, it can happen to you. So that was, but that was more embarrassing to me than to anybody else.

BB: And you're such a man of safety anyway, I mean.

JC: Well, and that, that, maybe that's why they made me the safety specialist, I don't know. (laughs)

BB: What do you think about the evolution of who's being hired and, I mean, are people coming into this job, what kind of advice do you give to people that might think that the, any facet of this ranger life is, is for them? How do you, what kind of advice would you give them if they came to you and knocked on your door or talked to you and said, “You know, I heard you were a parks service person. You know, what advice would you give me?”

JC: First I'd say don't, don't look to get rich. Do it because that's what you want to do. [0:45:01] But you need to spend some seasonal time and just explore the opportunities that
are out there if there’s any way possible. It’s tough to get on, tough to get on seasonal, even worse to try to get on permanent. Just the positions just aren’t there. But as far as training—is this the type of work you want to do? Is this where you want to be? Because to me there, you know, the life, the life, you know, the life of working in the parks service is second to none. It, you know, it’s, it’s the best career you can have. I was extremely fortunate. I worked at Biscayne early when I was a seasonal, then from there I worked, you know, I came back to Mammoth Cave as a 3 Step 9 because of a rate of a previous pay—

BB: What is that? Can you explain that to me? Or we can—

JC: Well, I, I started at Mammoth Cave as a GS4 and then a couple of years, a couple of seasons later, I was, became a GS5, which means you have more responsibility on your tours. That’s, that’s kind of the way they did it.

BB: Make more money?

JC: More money, a little bit more money. And when I went to Florida at Biscayne, that was a GS5, I had to come back as a GS3 because I had missed the summer before. They had changed the way they were bringing people in. So all new hires had to come in with a GS3. But because my previous rate of pay was a GS5, they couldn’t pay me less than that, so they had to pay me as a GS3 Step 9. So I was making more money than the GS5s were, but I couldn’t take a tour by myself. I had to have a GS5 with me on a tour. So there was one day, McNeil vanMeter from Brownsville and I were doing the lantern tours, and he, we were doing, that year we did them five days a week. And he would take one, he would guide one and I would guide one. We’d split them off. And one day, the first, first trip went out and it was my turn. I, I said, “Well, I’ll take them.” We had done this in years past, but I had missed that one, one summer. And so I went out with the tour and while we were gone, and next thing I know, when I get back, he says, “Well Lewis is climbing my behind.” I said, “Why?” He said, “Because I’m walking up here in the lobby in the, in the visitors center and he asked me where the, where the lantern tour is.” And he looked, he said, “I looked at my
watch,” He said, “Hm, it’s about Chief City.” And, and he said, “McNeil, you got to be the only one that can guide that. Nobody else can.” We got [. ] [phone ringing] [. ] Just pause it.

[INTERUPTION—TAPE STOPS]

JC: Am I getting too deep into that one?

BB: No, no, no, no, no, no. That was, that was good. No, I just think it’s, it’s interesting how people get into, and yeah, what you would tell people to do, because it sounds like you were, I mean, it’s like, it’s life, it’s evolutionary. You’ve learned as you’ve gone on.

JC: Um-hm.

BB: You’ve had good training.

JC: Well see, I had, I had a Bachelors degree in business administration. Now, do, do you think, people said, no, well, I’ve got one in forestry. Well so what? It, you know, what, what, what does that, what does that do? In mine, the business, the business side of it really kicked in when I was working the concession side of it. I’d been, let’s see, I’ve not worked the maintenance division, anywhere in that. But I, I grew up operating farm machinery all my life and making repairs to that stuff, so I can do that. And I spent, you know, a year and a half in Vietnam at an armory unit and a good part of that in motorpool, making repairs to blown up tanks and that sort of thing. So, I mean, the me-, the mechanical side of it, yeah, I’m used to, you know, being able to help rebuild a house with my dad. That sort of stuff, I see the carpentry side of it, and that sort of deal. So, you know, I don’t really miss anything, not being in the maintenance side. But you know, I, I spent a lot of time in my career, you know, administrative type positions and the supervisory positions. Basically working for the, you know, for the superintendent. And I think that’s one real key that people need to keep in mind, is the superintendent is the one that operates the park. So its, what does it, what does the superintendent want? And I’ve told several of them, as long as it’s not
immoral, fattening or illegal, we'll go for it. And it seemed like almost every superintendent that came through Mammoth Cave, he had another role that he wanted me to fill and, and I did. And it’s, it’s worked out. They paid me for it. I mean, how many people can, can say that they’ve worked a park service career primarily in one park from a GS3 to a GS13? And then retired? I looked at it and my wife looked at it, and what she was doing and what I was doing, it was going to take a financial beating and we’d be, have a lot longer commute and my wife’s job would be totally different and everything. And I told him, I said, you know, “Bob,” I said, “I just don’t see it.” [0:50:00] I said, “It’s going to be financially beating for us.” And he didn’t like it. Nobody ever told him no, but I did because just going down there to fill my ego wasn’t going to do any good. I mean, it would have been, it would have been an improvement in salary, but it would have been all eaten up in everything, all your other costs in a metropolitan area of Atlanta. And I thought, I’m better off to stay right where I’m at. So we built this house that we’re in today, we built it in ’92, been here since, so. Now it’s time to downsize. But anyway, that’s another story.

BB: This park, right now, mostly I’ve been concentrating my interviews with the working culture of Mammoth Cave folks. And they all love it and, for different reasons. You got a little bit, you know, you were a way for a while. The culture of this park, do you think it’s, it’s just the idea that you spent all these years here and you’ve cultivated what you have here? Is there something special about Mammoth Cave as, as far as you know, as opposed to other parks you’ve heard about or is it, is it the cave itself, is it just the people?

JC: I, I think, I think it’s a combination of things. A lot of people come to Mammoth Cave and they leave. And lots of times they try to come back. And if you, you know, and then it’s not just the work environment eight hours a day. It’s also the community around it. You know, some of them may be from the area, and a lot of them haven’t been from the area. But you know, if you ever go to a guides’ reunion, those people are from everywhere and
they just, they just love it. They said, it’s some of the best, best times of the their lives were when they were working at Mammoth Cave. And you look at the community around it, you know, you, it’s not like that you’ve got to get in the car and drive a half a day to go get a gallon of milk. I mean, everything that you want is within a short, you know, a short drive, you know, whether you’re living in the park, you know, which not many people do, or living somewhere outside of the park. And you know, culturally, there’s a lot of things to do. It’s just, it’s just a, you know, it’s a neat area, you know. People say, well, Kentucky’s backwards. Well, yeah, but, I mean, some of us wear shoes once in a while, so that, it, it’s good, but it’s, it’s good people. You know, for the most part, the people are there to do the right thing for the right reason. And that was one thing that I always wanted our people to do. You know, do what we need to do, but do the right thing for the right reason. You know, don’t worry about the rest of them.

BB: Lead by example, right?

JC: Well, you know, when I was division chief, if you had a problem with one of my employees, you took it up with me. You did not take it up with them. You tell me what was going on. I’d, I’d look into it. I would make the f-, if there was a fix to be made, I’d make it. But you didn’t, you didn’t start, you didn’t take off on my employees to them, no. You just, it was not, not allowed. And there was one division chief that I ran out of the, out of the office one day when he started doing that. And I just, and I told my people, don’t tell anybody about it. Just leave it alone, let it die. And he goes out and tells everybody about it. So I thought, well, I’m sorry, but you know, we, he didn’t, they didn’t, no one heard it from us. We just let, we just let it go. But again, you can, you can fuss at me, but you can’t fuss at my people.

BB: You’ve seen a lot of changes in the ranger, or evolving, and you’ve laid out the last, almost an hour, the different supervisors and superintendents changed things and what do you think, do you have any thoughts about the future? I know you’ve been away for a few years as you retired. You came back, retired when I was away from Kentucky for a while.
But what do you think about the future? Do you have, I mean, what, do you have hopes or dreams or forecasts?

JC: Well I, you know, I think while, when I was at, when I was working at the park, I think there were some things that we probably did that weren’t the right things to do, but you know, hindsight’s always 20/20. And so, you know, to go back and say, well, we did this for the wrong reasons, maybe. But at the time we thought it was, we thought it was the right thing to do. And I think that, that’s going to continue no-, as long as you got people involved with it, that’s going to happen. You know, right now, there’s concern about the hotel and, and the changes being made there be-, because they haven’t had a real long-term contract in some time. And so there’s some changes are going to be made there. Some rooms going to be taken out. Will it work? Well I don’t know. But they’ve, you know, supposedly the, from what I understand, what I’ve read in the reports from the parks service, they’ve done their homework to, to say, hey, you know, we think that, that plan A is going to work. Well, you won’t know until you get into it whether it will or not. Who, who, who knows any difference? You know, the travelling public is, is pretty fickle. And in Cave City, you, you look at what Cave City is today, and what it was twenty years ago, it’s all different. [0:55:03]

BB: How so?

JC: You’ve got more rooms, more places to accommodate tourists and that sort of thing that we didn’t have. At one time, Mammoth Cave was a destination. Well, right now, it’s more of a pass-through. And you have rooms, you have some rooms there and that sort of thing. You have things for people to do. But, you know, you don’t have a swimming pool, you know. A lot of these things that these kids are looking for, you know, game rooms, that sort of thing, they’re not there. They won’t be there. At least I don’t think they will. At least, you know, under the current guidelines that I worked under, they, they wouldn’t be there because they’re not appropriate for a national park. It, you’ve got to get, got to get people and you’ve got to get kids out from in front of the TV or off their telephones or iPhones or
whatever to, to get out and see what's really out there and what, what makes the world tick.

BB: Do you have any final thoughts? I’d like to, that you want to share with me before we conclude?

JC: I, you know, I’ve en-, I’ve enjoyed, I enjoyed my career at Mammoth Cave. And you know, and when I retired, I retired. I did, I never went back every, every week or every two weeks for coffee with the gang or anything like that. I thought, you know, if, if I’m going to retire, I need to make up my mind that I’m ready to retire and then I need to do it. And so, and that, and that’s what I’ve done. You know, it’s not that I went away mad. I didn’t. You know I didn’t want to go away, upset at anybody. I didn’t. I don’t think they did with me. But it was, we need time to make, you need to make that break because the people that are still there, still working, need to do the things that they’re trained to do, that they've been doing. They don’t need extra baggage coming in there looking over their shoulders, because I’m out of the picture anymore. I think when you retire, retire. Go, do something else. We, we accumulated several rental properties. And that’s, that keeps me quite busy. So I’m, I’m, now I'm ready to let those go. But you know, people that want to get, if you can get, if you can even get into the door of the parks service, it’s good duty. It really is. And it’s good people.

[END OF INTERVIEW]